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Serbia *and* Kosovo

By Dr. S. GEORGEVITCH.

SERBIA *and* KOSOVO.

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I.

THE present kingdom of Serbia occupies the centre of the Balkan Peninsula and extends on both banks of the rivers Morava and Vardar from the Danube and the Save almost to the Ægean Sea. But this is only a fragment of the territory occupied by the Serbo-Croat Nation which also forms the overwhelming majority of the population in Montenegro, Dalmatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, Slavonia, and the southern districts of Hungary proper, and which is one in origin, in language, in customs and national dress, and above all in its standard of civilization and feeling of national solidarity. The Serbo-Croats form the majority of the Southern Slav or Yugoslav race, to which also belongs the kindred Slovene race, speaking a dialect which only differs slightly from Serbo-Croat.

In the course of the sixth and seventh centuries the Balkan Peninsula, and indeed most of the land lying between the Alps and the Black Sea, gradually passed into the possession of the Slavs. At first, these primi-

tive agricultural tribes acknowledged the authority of Byzantium on the one hand and of the Germans on the other. But they soon pushed back the earlier inhabitants, the Greeks in the East and South and the Illyrians on the West along the Adriatic coast, or else mingled with them until they became the chief ethnographic element. Meanwhile, the first seeds of Christianity were sown among them by missionaries from both East and West. Various loosely-knit Slav states began to take shape in Carniola, Croatia, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The last of these sprang up on the territory lying between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, where the Slavonic population became blended with a conquering Mongol tribe known under the name of Bulgars. Carniola and Croatia, though inhabited by the same people as Serbia, fell under different influences and had a different historical destiny; they both lost their state-independence at an early date, and in spite of strong national feeling and powers of endurance, never succeeded in shaking off the yoke of the foreigner. Meanwhile Serbia from obscure beginnings, rose to strength and considerable prosperity under the Nemanyitch dynasty. The work of its founder, Stephen

Nemanya (1169-1186), was continued under his son, Stephen "the First Crowned," who assumed the title of king, and whose brother St. Sava, as the first archbishop of the Serbian national church, laid the foundations of Serbian spiritual independence and national literature. Under their successors the rich mines of Serbia were developed and a plentiful gold and silver coinage produced. Commercial relations were opened up with neighbouring and even with more distant states. Under the rule of King Milutin (1282-1321) Serbia greatly extended her frontiers and received her earliest written laws. Under Stephen Dushan (1331-1355) Serbia reached her zenith. Her frontiers extended from the Save and the Danube to the Gulf of Corinth, and from the Adriatic to the river Maritza. In 1346 Dushan proclaimed himself Emperor at Skoplje, and the Archbishop was raised to the rank of Patriarch. There was a considerable literary activity, and the masterpieces of Byzantine literature were translated into Serbian. The monasteries became centres for the development of a fresh and original Serbian architecture and art. Social organisation assumed a more definite form, and the early legislation of King Milutin found fuller expression in the

Code of Dushan, one of the most remarkable legal monuments of mediæval Europe, in which the jurisdiction of the church and relations with foreign powers were alike included. Under the Nemanya dynasty, Serbia represented a prosperous and civilized power in the Near East, ready to become the heir of decadent Byzantium. A Greek Imperial Princess married a Serbian King and Serbian princes were educated at Constantinople. The Greek language and civilization became the basis of Serbian culture and progress. Serbia ranked as an European power. The Emperor Frederick Barbarossa on his way to the Holy Land was the guest of Stephen Nemanya. King Ourosh married a Princess of the House of Anjou, and Serbian rulers were in close relations with the Papal See. The main commercial roads from Constantinople and Salonica to Central Europe and to the Adriatic, passed through Serbia, which was full of the vigour of a youthful race apparently destined to take a leading place among the nations of Eastern Europe. Serbia seemed to be a natural bridge connecting East and West and opening a path into Europe for the culture of the East. But a cruel destiny awaited Serbia and her people.

II. KOSOVO.

Tsar Dushan died in the year 1355 in the midst of ambitious and incomplete designs. His vast empire passed into the inexperienced hands of his son Ourosh, then still a minor. The Empire began to totter, the great nobles with whom the regency rested laying hands upon the various provinces and ruling them as virtually independent princes. Ourosh died in 1371, leaving Serbia weak and disunited. At the same time a new factor became apparent which soon exercised a fatal influence upon the whole future of Southern Europe. The Turks, already firmly established at Gallipoli, made their first attacks upon Serbian territory. In 1371, King Voukashin was defeated by them in the battle of the Maritza and lost his life. Macedonia fell into their power and the heart of the Serb race was soon threatened. To the north of Macedonia lay the state of Prince Lazar on the banks of the Morava, further west that of his rival Vouk Brankovitch, and still further west along the Adriatic coast those of Balshitch (roughly corresponding to the modern Montenegro) and of King Tvertko in Bosnia. The disaster on the Maritza was an object lesson to all these rulers of the magni-

tude and imminence of the Turkish danger ; for a time they united and held the Turks successfully at bay.

The victorious Sultan Murad was not satisfied with the conquest of the south and east of the Peninsula. His aim was the destruction of the last fragment of the Serbian Empire, and with it the strongest bulwark of Christendom in the East. On the field of Kosovo he assembled a huge army, well disciplined, fanatical, enriched with the booty of the conquered provinces and tempted by the promise of yet greater booty in Serbia. Under the leadership of the wise and noble Lazar the Serbian princes and their allies gave battle to the Turks at Kosovo. It was a decisive moment in history. A Serbian victory would have meant the free and independent development of Serbia and the triumph of the Christian cause in South Eastern Europe. The victory of the Turks ushered in centuries of subjection to a brutal invader and opened the gates of Central Europe to the barbarous Turks. The day of St. Vitus, 15 (28) June, 1389, when the Serbian army fought against overwhelming Turkish odds, is a turning point not only in Serbian, but in European history.

Lazar and all who fought at his side at Kosovo were worthy champions of the cause of Christianity. In the words of a Serbian national ballad it was a fight "for the Cross and golden liberty." After fighting like lions, Lazar and his entire family perished and with them the flower of Serbian chivalry "The flowers o' the forest were a' wede awa'."

The battle of Kosovo was the most sanguinary which history records. The Serbs were defeated, but dealt the Turks a deadly blow. Sultan Murad was slain in his tent on the eve of the battle by the Serb national hero—Milosh Obilitch, who was himself killed by the enraged Turks; and the Sultan's son Yakoub fell upon the field. The incidents of the great battle cannot be coldly registered, for they have been glorified by a whole cycle of national ballads, which record the tragic fall of the Serbian Empire. The nation was paralysed by such a blow; in the words of a contemporary chronicle—"there was no place in Serbia where cries and lamentations without parallel were not heard." It was a blow never to be forgotten. Out of its tears the Serbian nation composed the national epics of Kosovo, and in lamenting its fatal defeat concentrated all its bitter hatred of the

Turkish yoke and all its hopes for vengeance and national resurrection.

III. UNDER THE YOKE.

After the battle of Kosovo, Serbia dragged on a fitful existence for over half-a-century. During that time her princes or "despots" acknowledged the Turkish suzerainty, paid tribute to the Sultans, aided them in war and kept alive the old traditional glories of their state and nation. They continued to build churches and monasteries and to further art and literature. Western travellers who passed through Serbia during that period speak with admiration of her natural beauties, thick population, and of the general well-being of the inhabitants. Meanwhile Turkey's power grew stronger every day and in 1459 Serbian independence was finally wiped out. Henceforth Serbia became a scene of desolation and despair. The last members of her dynasty and her nobility had to fly the country. One by one the national characteristics of the state disappeared. In their desire to annihilate the last traces of Serbian independence, the Turks abolished the patriarchate and banished the national clergy. Following the nobles and the priests, the

merchants and the educated classes tended to leave Serbia and take refuge in Hungary and Poland, carrying with them such movable capital and treasures as they could save from the wreck. Thus Serbia grew more and more impoverished and presented a picture of utter misery. The towns were re-peopled by the Turks, the churches and monasteries destroyed or turned into mosques, frescoes and pictures of the saints destroyed or profaned; church bells turned into Turkish cannon and huge masses of the people fled to Hungary or, to escape from the Turks, withdrew from the fertile valleys into the mountains. On the roads which had once been the main trade routes between East and West and had been trodden by victorious Serbian troops, the Turks now transported their booty and drove wretched bands of Serbian youths and women to be sold in the slave markets of Constantinople, Asia and Africa. In 1557 the Serbian Patriarch was reinstated and became the focus of the feeble life of the nation. Seeing their sole hope of salvation in the enemies of the Turk, a later Patriarch accepted the invitation of the Austrian Emperor, and in 1690 settled with large masses of the Serbian people in Austrian territory. Thus Serbia

was left not only without leaders and without clergy, but virtually depopulated and deserted.

The travellers of the period mention with horror the empty villages, the untilled fields and overgrown forests, from which peeped out here and there ruined churches, desolated towns and the haggard faces of a few wretched human beings. The English writer, Lady Mary Montague, who in 1717 passed through Serbia, could not refrain from shedding tears over the destiny of that country and its people.

Such is a brief picture of Serbia after the battle of Kosovo. It is little short of a miracle that the Serbian nation did not perish altogether. It survived, thanks only to its wonderful virility and powers of resistance, to its sound family organisation and to its highly developed national conscience. Living in numerous patriarchal families, the so-called "Zadrugas," the Serbian nation preserved its old morality and love of freedom and with it the living tradition and memory of past greatness. The more remote the days of past prosperity, the more beautiful and idealised they became, the more suited as the inspiration of national poetry, which invariably

centred round the Battle of Kosovo. In the songs of its primitive gousla-players the Serbian nation preserved the fragments of its history. In them, Nemanya, founder of the dynasty ; St. Sava, the true founder of the national church ; the great Tsar Dushan, the hero of the golden age ; Tsar Lazar, who chose a heavenly rather than an earthly kingdom ; Milos Obilitch, who gave his life to kill the hated Sultan ; and Marko Kraljevitich, the half mythical hero of a hundred fights ; filled the imagination of an oppressed race. The scenes of their former greatness, the white and shining fortress of Prizren ; the Lake of Ohrida ; the river Maritza, where King Vukashin lost Serbia Macedonia ; Kosovo, the " field of the blackbirds," where the Serbian Empire perished ; Zengg (Senj) on the Croatian coast, where the Ouzkok pirates held their own against all comers ; were peopled with the epic deeds of Serbian national heroes.

IV.—RESURRECTION.

Rooted in the memories of a great past the Serbian nation in its days of suffering was always ready to sacrifice anything to shake off the yoke. Ever since the fall of independ-

ence the mountains of Serbia were full of desperate men whose only pleasure was to wreak their vengeance upon the Turk. During the long struggle of the Habsburgs against the Ottoman power the Emperor made repeated appeals for the help of the Serbs, and the Serbs always responded to the call. At last came the events which were not only the prologue of deliverance but a proof of common aspirations on the part of all branches of the Serbian nation. During the Austro-Turkish war of 1788-1791 the Serbs looked for their liberation through the aid of Austria. From all parts they flocked to swell the ranks of the Austrian army and even formed an irregular corps of Serbian volunteers against the Turks. The list of members of the corps promoted to the rank of officers contains names from Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Syrmia, Batchka and the Banat, thus proving the national solidarity of the Serbian people. The most popular Serbian writers, men like the historian Rayitch and Obradovitch, both natives of Austrian territory, greeted with enthusiasm the struggle for Serbian liberation.

For the Serbian people this Austro-Turkish war was a fighting school through which

passed all the chief leaders of the subsequent insurrection, notably Kara George himself. The treaty of Svistov which brought the war to a close in 1791 failed to bring any real alleviation for the lot of Serbia. Abuses and oppression on the part of the Turks began again on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Exaction, plunder and the assassination of a number of those who had been most prominent on the side of the Austrians, exasperated the Serbs and led directly to the insurrection of 1804. Here again the strong sense of national unity clearly manifested itself. The rising took place only in the north of what is now the kingdom of Serbia, but volunteers at once flocked from Macedonia, Bosnia, Syrmia and the Banat, and swelled the ranks of the insurgents under the leadership of Kara George. Arms, munitions and stores were smuggled across the Austrian frontier by patriotic Austrian Serbs; while Serbian writers and poets abroad pleaded their national cause in Europe or came to Serbia to assist in organising the new administration. The old philosopher, Dositey Obradovitch, the first Serbian literary man to study in London, devoted all his savings to the national cause and came to Serbia to open the first schools



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and lay the foundation of a national system of education.

The struggle under Kara George lasted nine years (1804-1813). It was a war in which the Serbs gave sterling proofs of self-sacrifice, courage and endurance worthy of the era of Thermopylæ. In 1809, at Kamenitza, near Nish, Stephen Singelitch, realising the fatal superiority of the Turkish forces which were attacking him, with his own hand blew up the powder magazine at the moment of the assault. A fearful explosion destroyed the remnant of the Serbian garrison and with them large numbers of Turkish soldiers. The Turks cut off the heads of their victims and out of these erected a hideous tower of skulls, a monument of bestial hate and vengeance for which it would be hard to find a parallel. Hayduk Velko, who defended the little town Negotin against the Turks, has become a legendary hero, thanks to his daring sallies and the courage which he displayed against tremendous odds. It was by such deeds as these that the Serbian nation laid the foundation of a new State, which, though overwhelmed in 1813, reasserted itself two years later by new sacrifice and struggle. In 1830, Serbia was enlarged and consolidated and

her autonomy recognised by the Turkish suzerainty. In 1828 she obtained a further extension of her territory as the result of her share in the Russo-Turkish war and secured the recognition of her complete independence. In 1882 the principality of Serbia was erected into a kingdom. At last in 1912-1913, during the war of the Balkan League against Turkey, she broke in pieces the last of those Turkish chains which still fettered the Serbian people. But no sooner did the work of liberation seem complete than she had to face another danger and to engage upon the last and decisive struggle for the freedom and unity of her whole race, more than seven millions of whom are subjected to the double tyranny of Austria and Hungary.

